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SUBJECT: Tibetan Scholars: Cultural Preservation
Cannot Be A Boutique Luxury

Summary

1. (SBU) Tibetan scholars and monks in Gansu Province advocated focused, selective cultural preservation in discussions with Poloffs during a recent visit, but stressed that making culture a boutique luxury is not the path to success in this effort. Acknowledging that some aspects of Tibetan culture do not blend easily with the modernization that Tibetans themselves seek, they stressed the imperative of preserving the Tibetan language as central to the continuation of Tibetan culture. Without the adoption of this priority by the state-sponsored education system, Tibetan language will disappear and take much of the traditional culture with it. With regard to other Tibetan traditions, experts we spoke with insisted that traditions need to be tied to sustainable market opportunities such as tourism, local festivals and other economic activity. Consensus on plans to preserve specific aspects of Tibetan culture must be achieved quickly, they stated, or it will be too late. End summary.

Selective, Practical Cultural Preservation

2. (SBU) The rapid Sinification of ethnic Tibetan communities in Gansu Province and surrounding areas is forcing Tibetans to make practical choices about preserving their culture. Contrary to some claims, many Tibetans are embracing Sinification or the gradual adoption of mainstream Chinese culture, social practices and lifestyle. This leaves Tibetan culture and its advocates two choices, monks and scholars noted. One is to be steamrolled by internal and external pressure to become "more Chinese." The second is to concede aspects of culture that appear best suited for a history museum and build a consensus around promoting the maintenance of cultural elements which can maintain relevance in the modern world.

3. (SBU) As Lanzhou University Tibetology scholar (and adjunct professor at Indiana University) Tsongkha pointed out, there is adequate funding from the Government for projects aimed at preserving the historical record of Tibetan culture. For example, Dr. Tsongkha said he and his graduate students have

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funding to conduct wide-ranging field research to preserve the record of local languages, folk customs and traditional performance art and community games. More pressing, however, is the failure of efforts to promote the continuation of modern-day Tibetan culture. Dr. Tsongkha assessed that a lack of consensus and coordination, unrealistic goals, insufficient funding

and ineffective motivators have been barriers to progress in this area.

¶4. (SBU) To be sustainable, modern-day, living Tibetan culture must provide Tibetans with tangible social, religious or economic benefits within the framework of modern Chinese society. Efforts that pit retaining tradition against attaining greater socio-economic opportunities are doomed to fail. Successful cultural preservation projects must overcome this dilemma with equal parts selectivity, marketing and cunning, Tsongkha theorized. They must entice local populations to participate in cultural activities and retain traditions by packaging them with relevant social, educational and economic opportunities.

A Tibetan County Fair

¶5. (SBU) In one example, Dr. Tsongkha has sponsored "Tibetan Village Games", the Tibetan version of a midwestern county fair. After some experimentation, Tsongkha said that holding such fairs in the winter

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was most effective as most rural Tibetans are economically idle in winter and are a captive audience. Through promotional techniques and advertising small prizes and the opportunity to socialize with neighbors, Tsongkha said he had been able to attract enthusiastic

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local participation in the village games. By promoting communal activities, Tsongkha was able to revive knowledge of traditional Tibetan games and provide some economic activity for the village during its leanest season. He is currently making the rounds of local villages in Tibetan Gansu to promote the idea of his winter games with local village officials. "I often point out to them that a festival will spur

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economic activity, build a harmonious society and help get them promoted, anything they want to hear to get them interested," he commented unabashedly.

¶6. (SBU) Despite these efforts, retaining traditional culture can be a hard sell, especially in urban and ethnically mixed areas where the pressure to and rewards for assimilating are all the more pronounced. As such, village games held in mixed areas have never been financially self-sustaining. Tsongkha complained that in areas where Tibetans are

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in the minority, they are unwilling to make efforts to preserve Tibetan culture in the face of Han Chinese dominance. For example, his brother preferred to build a "Chinese style" house in their village, as opposed to a traditional Tibetan house. He believed that a Tibetan house would mark him as unmodern, Tsongkha said. (Note: The majority of Tibetans in

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this area, close to the provincial capital of Qinghai and the important Kumbum Monastery, do not speak Tibetan. End Note.) The psychology in these areas of a link between the anti-modern and Tibetan culture must be broken, Tsongkha stated. In mixed areas, Tibetan language itself is at risk; many young urban Tibetans no longer speak or read it, Tsongkha noted.

The Trouble with Language

¶7. (SBU) This points to a broader crisis for the

Tibetan language and issues Tibetan youth face in attempting to succeed in China's higher education system. Tibetan culture is strongly rooted in language and many believe that if the language dies out, so will the culture. The only hope for the Tibetan language is standardization of regional dialects and institutionalization through incorporation into the state-sponsored education system, commented Tsutrim, a monk who is also the vice-headmaster of a privately-funded traditional Tibetan nomad school in Qinghai Province.

18. (SBU) Yet Tibetans on both sides of the culture debate have resisted these obvious steps. Preservationists cling to the notion that every local dialect should be preserved while assimilated Tibetans leave their language behind, directing their children towards Mandarin and English as the only path to success, Tsongkha noted. Even if Tibetans reach a consensus, attach benefits to studying the Tibetan language and succeed in pushing for its inclusion in the school system, Tibetan may simply become an added linguistic burden with no practical use for many of the Tibetan youth who are already struggling in the current education system. Saddled with another language to master, economic obstacles and the tainted legacy of ethnic minority higher education as a recruiting system for Party cadres, Tibetans still don't see higher education as a path to success and few succeed at the national level, Tsutrim acknowledged.

Getting Government Support

19. (SBU) Tsongkha, Tsutrim and the founder of a Tibetan cultural website all separately agreed that local governments could be persuaded to support cultural preservation projects, as long as they see it in their interest. The key to success in this regard is to promote projects aimed at meeting government goals of cultural preservation, conservation, community health and economic dynamism while treading lightly around sensitive issues like religion. Tsutrim noted that while his school teaches a very

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traditional Tibetan curriculum, the school works with local education officials, also teaches the national curriculum and provides schooling for underserved students. Officials are able to promote the school to their superiors as an example of innovative (and free to the government) cultural preservation. Dr. Tsongkha said he actively courts local officials and

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academic institutions, who then attach themselves to his projects and publicize them as their own achievements. While his village games aim to promote the unique Tibetan identity, they are marketed to officials as cultural preservation and social outreach allowing them to support the projects with little risk.

Comment

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10. (SBU) Any lack of consensus among Tibetan preservationists over how to go about most effectively preserving important aspects of Tibetan identity threatens to delay preservation efforts and speed Sinification. Efforts to build consensus are hampered, however, by the artificial divisions that have been created among Tibetan administrative regions among other barriers. Tibetans debate the issue of

standardizing Tibetan language on websites devoted to Tibetan culture, but meanwhile, many Tibetan children are speaking only in Chinese. Academics have not even yet fully perfected the "unicode" that will allow Tibetan to be globally digitized. Efforts such as those advocated by experts we spoke with will need to be stepped up and more broadly supported if they are to be successful. As one Tibetan contact recently lamented, "the modern world has come to us too quickly and we are not able to adjust as fast."

RANDT